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Memorandum

TO: Heads of Fire Departments

FROM: Stephen D. Coan
State Fire Marshal

DATE: January 1, 2009

SUBJECT: Hospitals

Attached for informational purposes is a letter from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health highlighting some of the background and strategies developed to address the ongoing problems of hospital emergency department (ED) crowding, patient boarding while awaiting bed placement, and ambulance diversion.

The Department of Fire Services, Office of the State Fire Marshal, is providing the following guidance to assist in the evaluation of hospital fire protection and evacuation plans while acknowledging the realities of crowded hospitals and surges in patient volume. We encourage fire departments to work with their local hospitals to address these important issues.

Both the Massachusetts General Laws and the State Fire Code 527 CMR 10.08(1) have requirements that affect fire departments and hospitals throughout the state. The general laws recognize the inherent life safety issues with hospitals and mandate quarterly inspections. The Board of Fire Prevention Regulations has developed a requirement for hospital fire drill and evacuation planning requirements below:

527 CMR 10.08: Hospitals

(1) All hospitals shall conform to the following fire drill regulations:

(a) Each hospital shall formulate a plan for the protection and evacuation of all persons in event of fire; such plan shall be presented to and approved by the head of the fire department. All employees shall be kept informed of their duties under such plan.

(b) The head of the fire department shall visit each hospital at least four times each year for the purpose of ascertaining whether the supervisors, attendants and other personnel are familiar with the approved plan of evacuation.

It is our recommendation that the emergency hospital plans be reviewed and updated in conjunction with the new guidelines being issued by the Department of Public Health that have an effective date of January 1, 2009.

As part of this update here are several questions that should be considered for review by the local fire department and the hospitals:

1. What happens in an emergency now? Are patients sheltered in place?
2. If so, how are they sheltered in place in the emergency room?
3. Is there another part of the hospital that has a requirement for relocation to the emergency room? If so, can the emergency room still handle additional patients?
4. Does the plan include relocation from the emergency room? If so, can the relocation area handle additional patients?
5. In the event of relocation or sheltering in place does the plan take into consideration a proper egress route?
6. When the hospital needs to find additional space due to a surge in patients from the Emergency Department who need admission, patient safety concerns may dictate that such patients be relocated to alternate space, such as inpatient floors. Is there a plan in place to ensure adequate egress from an inpatient floor or other alternate space? In these circumstances fire chiefs should work closely with their local hospitals to understand all aspects of the hospital's emergency plans.

If you have any questions please call the Code Compliance & Enforcement Unit at (978) 567-3375 or in western Massachusetts (413) 587-3181.

SDC/bhs
Enc.